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IN THIS ISSUE:

	Page
NEWS RELEASES-	
0259 USDA Renews Flue-Cured Tobacco Advisory Committee	1
0260 USDA Renews Burley Tobacco Advisory Committee	1
0263 USDA Initiates First Permanent Revocation Of An Animal Dealer's License	2
0264 Natural Chemicals From Insects' Brains Offer Clues To Pest Control	2
0266 USDA Upgrades Status Of Texas In Brucellosis Eradication Program	3
0271 USDA Authorizes Licensed Warehousement To Use Electronic Cotton Warehouse Receipts ..	4
0273 Lebanon, Philippines And Yemen Eligible Cor More Wheat Under Export Enhancement Program	4
0274 CCC Interest Rate For April 4-1/4 Percent	5
0275 CCC Announces 1994-Crop Honey Loan Rate At 50.0 Cents	5
0276 USDA Announces Signup Period For Wetlands Program In Flooded Midwestern States	5
0277 United States And Canada Negotiators To Meet	6
PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENTS-	
0265 USDA Announces Prevailing World Market Rice Prices, Marketing Certificate Rates	7
0270 USDA Announces Prevailing World Market Price And User Marketing Certificate Payment Rate For Upland Cotton	7
0272 Sugar Marketing Allotments Unnecessary For 1994 FY 3RD Quarter	8
FEATURES-	
0261 USDA Offers Advice On Safe Handling Of Spring Meats	9
0262 USDA Meat And Poultry Hotline's Sping "Eggs-Posé"	10

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News Releases-

Release No. 0259.94
Alicia L. Ford (202) 720-8998
Ron Hall (202) 720-3310

USDA RENEWS FLUE-CURED TOBACCO ADVISORY COMMITTEE

WASHINGTON, March 28--The U.S. Department of Agriculture has renewed the Flue-Cured Tobacco Advisory Committee for two years.

Lon Hatamiya, administrator of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, said that under provisions of the Tobacco Inspection Act, tobacco must be officially inspected to be sold at auction on any designated market.

The Flue-Cured Tobacco Advisory Committee provides information essential to the orderly marketing of flue-cured tobacco. The committee also recommends opening dates and selling schedules for the flue-cured regions from Virginia to Florida.

The 39-member advisory committee is composed of 21 producers, 10 warehousemen and eight buyers.

The committee, authorized by the Federal Advisory Committee Act, reports through the assistant secretary of agriculture for marketing and inspection services. It has been renewed every two years since its establishment in 1974. AMS oversees the operation of the committee for the secretary.

USDA will announce the names of the committee members and their alternates once they have been selected.

Details were published in today's Federal Register for March 28.



Release No. 0260.94
Alicia L. Ford (202) 720-8998
Ron Hall (202) 720-3310

USDA RENEWS BURLEY TOBACCO ADVISORY COMMITTEE

WASHINGTON, March 28--The U.S. Department of Agriculture has renewed the Burley Tobacco Advisory Committee for two years.

Lon Hatamiya, administrator of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, said that under provisions of the Tobacco Inspection Act, tobacco must be officially inspected to be sold at auction on any designated market.

The Burley Tobacco Advisory Committee, established in 1990, provides information essential to the orderly marketing of burley tobacco. The committee also recommends opening dates and selling schedules for the burley tobacco growing regions from Missouri to Virginia.

The 39-member advisory committee is composed of 21 producers, 10 warehousemen and eight buyers.

The committee, authorized by the Federal Advisory Committee Act, reports through the assistant secretary of agriculture for marketing and inspection services. AMS administers the operation of the committee for the secretary.

USDA will announce the names of the committee members and their alternates once they have been selected.

Details were published in today's Federal Register for March 28.



Release No. 0263.94
Cynthia A. Eck (301) 436-5931
Ron Hall (202) 720-3310

USDA INITIATES FIRST PERMANENT REVOCATION OF AN ANIMAL DEALER'S LICENSE

WASHINGTON, March 28--The U.S. Department of Agriculture has settled a case against Ervin Stebane, a Kaukauna, Wis., animal dealer, for violations of the Animal Welfare Act. In the settlement USDA permanently revoked Stebane's license to operate as a dealer.

"This is the first time that USDA has permanently revoked an animal dealer's license," said Patricia Jensen, acting assistant secretary of agriculture for marketing and inspection services. "This is an example of our increased efforts to prevent animal dealers from violating the Animal Welfare Act regulations."

Stebane was charged in June 1993 for violations of recordkeeping and for failing to comply with an exercise requirement for dogs. The case was later amended on evidence that Stebane willfully violated the AWA's requirements for recordkeeping, acquiring dogs, veterinary care and maintenance of his facilities.

Stebane settled the case by agreeing to the entry of a consent decision and by waiving the right to a hearing before an administrative law judge.

Under the AWA, animal dealers, breeders, exhibitors, research facilities and transportation companies must be licensed or registered with USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

The AWA requires that regulated individuals and businesses provide animals with care and treatment according to standards established by APHIS. Animals protected by the law must be provided with adequate housing, handling, sanitation, food, water, transportation, veterinary care and shelter.

The law covers animals that are sold as pets at the wholesale level, transported in commerce, used for biomedical research and used for exhibition purposes. The regulations also provide for the exercise of dogs and a physical environment that adequately promotes the psychological well-being of non-human primates.

APHIS enforces the AWA through administrative prosecution when warranted. An alleged violator is served with a complaint stating the charges and seeking the appropriate penalties. If the respondent fails to answer the charges in the complaint, a USDA administrative law judge issues a default order that includes assessment of penalties. When the respondent files an answer to the complaint, the case proceeds to resolution either by consent decision or by oral hearing.



Release No. 0264.94
Sandy Miller Hays (301) 344-2764
Maria Bynum (202) 720-5192

NATURAL CHEMICALS FROM INSECTS' BRAINS OFFER CLUES TO PEST CONTROL

WASHINGTON, March 29--When U.S. Department of Agriculture researchers couldn't crack the mystery behind a natural chemical chain's control over body functions of pest insects, they resorted to an unusual tactic: They chemically tied the chain's ends together, sat back and watched.

Chemist Ronald J. Nachman and entomologist G. Mark Holman are studying neuropeptides--chains of amino acids sent forth by insects' brains to stimulate specific life-sustaining functions. The neuropeptides attach to receptors in the insect's body, much like a key in a lock, to start the desired function, such as molting or digestion. The scientists' goal is to create artificial versions of neuropeptides that could be used to control or kill insect pests.

"For example, we might create a synthetic version that fills the receptor and transmits the signal non-stop for the specific function, creating all kinds of havoc in the insect's body," explained Nachman. "Or we might create a version that binds to the receptor, but can't turn the receptor on and won't let the natural peptide get in to turn on the receptor," he continued.

But first the scientists needed to find just the right shape of peptide to fit the crucial receptors. The neuropeptide itself offered no clues; left floating freely in solution, it thrashed around in a kaleidoscope of formations.

"So we took the two ends and tied them together," Nachman said. "We thought that if we restricted its ability to move, it might get into its favored position." The hunch paid off: The peptide backbone formed into a saddle shape that fits the insect receptors.

In studies at the Food Animal Protection Research Laboratory operated at College Station, Texas, by USDA's Agricultural Research Service, Nachman and Holman had already discovered a "family" of neuropeptides that control different functions in different insects, but share a common chemical core. This family has been associated with physiological activities ranging from contractions of the egg-laying organ to hibernation in a number of insects.

"The more physiological processes this neuropeptide family is involved in, the more processes we can disrupt with man-made substitutes," Nachman said. Next, the scientists must determine the composition and importance of chemical "sidechains" attached to the saddle-shaped backbone. "We plan to compare the shape and chemistry of the sidechains with the shape and chemistry of known organic compounds," Nachman said.

"Once we have found substitutes for the natural components of the peptide chain, we will construct artificial versions to disrupt the life processes of insect pests such as stable flies. We think peptide substitutes could have widespread applications in future pest management strategies."

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Contact for details Ronald J. Nachman or G. Mark Holman, ARS Food Animal Protection Research Laboratory, Agricultural Research Service, USDA, College Station, Texas 77845. Telephone: (409) 260-9315.

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Release No. 0266.94
Kendra Pratt (301) 436-4898
Ron Hall (202) 720-3310

USDA UPGRADES STATUS OF TEXAS IN BRUCELLOSIS ERADICATION PROGRAM

WASHINGTON, March 29--The U.S. Department of Agriculture has upgraded Texas to Class A status in the national brucellosis eradication program in recognition of intensive efforts within the state to control this bacterial disease of cattle.

"We commend the Texas cattle industry, the Texas Animal Health Commission, and the state's veterinary practitioners for this achievement and for their strong commitment to becoming a brucellosis-free state," said Donald Luchsinger, acting deputy administrator of veterinary services in USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Texas is the final state to achieve Class A status in the National Cooperative Federal-State Brucellosis Eradication Program. Billy Johnson, former deputy administrator of veterinary services in APHIS, presented a certificate to the Texas Animal Health Commission on behalf of USDA in Fort Worth on March 28.

Currently 32 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are free of bovine brucellosis and 17 states in addition to Texas hold Class A status in the eradication program. As of February 1994, only 229 of the 1,262,489 cattle herds in the United States were under quarantine for brucellosis.

"The success of the program in Texas is a major milestone for the national strategy of eradicating this disease by 1998," Luchsinger said.

Beyond the boost that this upgrade gives the entire program, Class A status will also remove certain requirements on Texas cattle moving to other states for breeding purposes. Total annual savings to the state's cattle industry from reduced brucellosis testing requirements is estimated to be \$560,000.

The eradication program uses a classification system to indicate progress in eliminating brucellosis. States reach class-free status when none of its cattle are found to be infected for 12 consecutive months. To qualify for Class A status, a state cannot have more than 0.25 percent (2.5 herds per 1,000) of its herds infected during the qualifying year. A Class A state must also maintain a comprehensive testing program at stockyards, farms, ranches and slaughterhouses that shows the annual disease prevalence rate does not exceed one reactor animal per 1,000 cattle.

This interim rule was published in the March 28 Federal Register and became effective at that time.

To submit a comment, send an original and three copies of written comments referring to docket number 94-008-01 on or before May 27 to: Chief, Regulatory Analysis and Development, PPD, APHIS, USDA, Room 804 Federal Building, 6505 Belcrest Road, Hyattsville, Md. 20782. Comments once received may be reviewed at USDA, Room 1141 South Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C., between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except holidays. Persons wishing to review comments are requested to call ahead on (202) 690-2817 to facilitate entry into the comment reading room.



Release No. 0271.94
Wayne Baggett (202) 720-3020
Robert Feist (202) 720-6789

USDA AUTHORIZES LICENSED WAREHOUSEMEN TO USE ELECTRONIC COTTON WAREHOUSE RECEIPTS

WASHINGTON, March 31--Effective May 2, the U.S. Department of Agriculture will allow warehousemen licensed under the United States Warehouse Act (USWA) to issue electronic receipts in lieu of paper receipts for cotton.

The electronic receipts are fully negotiable and can be transferred from one holder to another through a provider approved by the USDA's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS). USWA licensed warehousemen will be required to use providers of a central filing system, or database, to store the warehouse receipt data created under this new system. The provider of the system may be a private individual or entity approved by the secretary of agriculture.

The Congress amended The United States Warehouse Act on Oct. 28, 1992 (Public Law 102-553) enabling the Secretary of Agriculture to authorize the use of electronic cotton warehouse receipts by USWA warehouses.

In a notice published in the Aug. 16, 1993, Federal Register, the USDA requested comments on its proposal to permit the 167 USWA licensed warehousemen to voluntarily issue electronic cotton warehouse receipts. There were 423 responses from producers, ginners, warehousemen, cooperatives, shippers, trade associations and members of Congress to the proposal.

The final rule was published in the Federal Register today and will become effective May 2.



Release No. 0273.94
Wayne Baggett (202) 720-2032
Billy Cox (202) 720-3329

LEBANON, PHILIPPINES AND YEMEN ELIGIBLE FOR MORE WHEAT UNDER EXPORT ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

WASHINGTON, APRIL 1--Acting Under Secretary of Agriculture Dallas Smith today announced an opportunity for sales of an additional 630,000 metric tons of U.S. wheat to three countries under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Export Enhancement Program.

Sales of wheat will be made to buyers in Lebanon (100,000 metric tons), Philippines (230,000 metric tons) and Yemen (300,000 metric tons) through commercial channels at competitive world prices. Sales will be facilitated through the payment of bonuses by USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation.

The allocations will be valid until June 30, 1994, as provided in the invitations for offers. Details of the program will be issued in the near future.

For more information call Richard J. Chavez, (202) 720-5540, or Larry McElvain, (202) 720-6211.

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Release No. 0274.94
Bruce Merkle (202) 720-8206

CCC INTEREST RATE FOR APRIL 4-1/4 PERCENT

WASHINGTON, April 1--Commodity loans disbursed in April by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Commodity Credit Corporation will carry a 4-1/4 percent interest rate, according to Grant Buntrock, executive vice president of the CCC.

The 4-1/4 percent is up from March's 3-3/4 percent and reflects the interest rate charged CCC by the U.S. Treasury.

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Release No. 0275.94
Wayne Baggett (202) 720-2032
John Carlin Ryan (202) 720-8207

CCC ANNOUNCES 1994-CROP HONEY LOAN RATE AT 50.0 CENTS

WASHINGTON, April 1--Grant Buntrock, executive vice-president of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), announced that, effective today, the price-support loan rate for 1994-crop honey will be 50.0 cents per pound. This rate is 3.8 cents below the 1993-crop loan rate, and it applies to all colors and classes.

Honey price-support loans will be available at county offices of USDA's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service on April 1. Because of actions by Congress to phase out the Honey Program, repayments of the 1994-crop honey loans will be at the loan rate plus interest, for the period April 1 through September 30. During this time period, marketing loans and loan deficiency provisions will not be available. This results in the 1994 honey program operating at no net cost to CCC during FY 1994. Repayment provisions after that date will be as announced by CCC.

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Release No. 0276.94
Tom Amontree (202) 720-4623
Diana Morse (202) 720-4772

USDA ANNOUNCES SIGNUP PERIOD FOR WETLANDS PROGRAM IN FLOODED MIDWESTERN STATES

WASHINGTON, April 1--Landowners in the midwestern states flooded last year will have the opportunity to return cropland to wetlands during the second signup period for the Emergency Wetlands Reserve Program (EWRP).

"This program will continue to provide assistance to landowners to convert flood-damaged cropland to wetlands, and pay them to protect the wetlands with a permanent easement," said Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy.

"We can achieve the Clinton Administration's goal of strong and productive communities and a healthy environment if we work cooperatively with farmers and private landowners. The EWRP is an excellent example of this cooperation and our ongoing commitment to this goal," Espy said.

The signup period, in local SCS offices in the Midwest, begins today and continues through December 30.

Landowners in the Midwest are eligible when the cost of cropland reclamation and/or levee repair exceeds the fair market value of affected cropland. The Soil Conservation Service will make this eligibility determination, working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies, commodity and environmental groups, farm managers, and appraisers.

Landowners can apply for the program through SCS in the eight states which allow permanent easements--Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Under the program, SCS will purchase easements to promote restoration and maintenance of wetland characteristics, thus providing and protecting the functions and values of the wetlands for wildlife habitat, water quality improvement, floodwater retention, floodway enhancement, groundwater recharge, and environmental education. In addition, this is a long term alternative to levee repair. The landowner will continue to control access to EWRP land.

The EWRP will provide at least 75 percent of the cost to restore the land to wetland. To be eligible, the land must have been cropped in at least one of the last five years.

The first EWRP signup returned an estimated 25,000 acres to wetlands in the Midwest. Missouri led the list of states with 12,300 acres accepted, followed by Iowa with almost 6,000.



Release No. 0277.94
Steve Kinsella (202) 720-4623

UNITED STATES AND CANADA NEGOTIATORS TO MEET

WASHINGTON, April 1 -- Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy said today that he and Trade Representative Mickey Kantor will meet with their Canadian counterparts in Marrakech, Morocco, during the GATT Ministerial April 11-16, to discuss outstanding agricultural issues between the United States and Canada.

In preparations for the meeting in Marrakech, discussions will be held in Washington between U.S. and Canadian officials on Tuesday, April 5. Espy said the upcoming meetings were the result of conversations between high level U.S. and Canadian officials.

"I have said all along that we are willing to discuss these issues with the Canadians at anytime, but we insist that any agreement has to be based on the principles of fairness and equity across the range of disputed commodities," Espy said.

Espy met on March 21 in Toronto with Canadian Minister Goodale, where they attempted to resolve a variety of outstanding agricultural trade issues including grain exports to the United States, dairy, poultry, peanut products and sugar.



Program Announcement-

Release No. 0265.94
 Gene Rosera (202) 720-6734
 Charles Hobbs (202) 720-4026

USDA ANNOUNCES PREVAILING WORLD MARKET RICE PRICES, MARKETING CERTIFICATE RATES

WASHINGTON, March 29-- Acting Under Secretary of Agriculture Dallas Smith today announced the prevailing world market prices of milled rice, loan rate basis, as follows:

--long grain whole kernels:	11.32 cents per pound
--medium grain whole kernels:	11.54 cents per pound
--short grain whole kernels:	11.40 cents per pound
--broken kernels:	5.66 cents per pound

Based upon these milled rice world market prices, loan deficiency payment rates, gains from repaying price support loans at the world market price, and marketing certificate rates are zero.

The prices announced are effective today at 3 p.m. EST. The next scheduled price announcement will be made April 5, at 3 p.m. EDT.



Release No. 0270.94
 Minnie Tom Meyer (202) 720-6734
 Charles Hobbs (202) 720-9045

USDA ANNOUNCES PREVAILING WORLD MARKET PRICE AND USER MARKETING CERTIFICATE PAYMENT RATE FOR UPLAND COTTON

WASHINGTON, March 31--Grant Buntrock, executive vice president of USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation, today announced the prevailing world market price, adjusted to U.S. quality and location (adjusted world price or AWP), for Strict Low Middling (SLM) 1-1/16 inch (leaf grade 4, micronaire 3.5-3.6 and 4.3-4.9, strength 24-25 grams per tex) upland cotton (base quality), and the coarse count adjustment (CCA) in effect from 5:00 p.m. today through 3:59 p.m. Thursday, April 7. The user marketing certificate payment rate announced today is in effect from 12:01 a.m. Friday, April 1 through midnight Thursday, April 7.

The Agricultural Act of 1949, as amended, provides that the AWP may be further adjusted if: (a) the AWP is less than 115 percent of the current crop year loan rate for base quality upland cotton, and (b) the Friday through Thursday average price quotation for the lowest-priced U.S. growth as quoted for Middling (M) 1-3/32 inch cotton, C.I.F. northern Europe (USNE price) exceeds the Northern Europe (NE) price. Because this week's calculated AWP is equal to 131.17 percent of the 1993 upland cotton base quality loan rate, a further adjustment cannot be made.

This week's AWP and coarse count adjustment are determined as follows:

<u>Adjusted World Price</u>	
NE Price	82.39
Adjustments:	
Avg. U.S. spot market location	11.91
SLM 1-1/16 inch cotton	1.50
Avg. U.S. location	0.31
Sum of Adjustments	- 13.72
ADJUSTED WORLD PRICE	68.67 cents/lb.

Coarse Count Adjustment

NE Price	82.39	
NE Coarse Count Price	- 79.21	
	3.18	
Adjustment to SLM 1-1/32 inch cotton	- 3.20	
	- 0.02	
COARSE COUNT ADJUSTMENT	0	cents/lb.

Because the AWP is above 52.35 cents per pound--the base quality loan rate for both the 1992 and 1993 marketing years--the loan repayment rate during this period is equal to the loan rate, adjusted for the specific quality and location plus applicable interest and storage charges. The AWP will continue to be used to determine the value of upland cotton that is obtained in exchange for commodity certificates.

Because the AWP is above the 1993-crop loan rate, loan deficiency payments are not available during this period.

The USNE price has not exceeded the NE price by more than 1.25 cents per pound for four consecutive weeks, nor have all of the previous four AWP's been less than 130 percent of the 1993 crop year base quality loan rate. As a result, the user marketing certificate payment rate is zero. Relevant data are summarized below:

Week	For the Friday through Thursday Period Ending	AWP (Announced) As Percent of Loan Rate	USNE Price	NE Price cents/lb	User Marketing Certificate Payment Rate
1	Mar. 10, 1994	130.1	83.45	81.84	0
2	Mar. 17, 1994	129.3	83.00	81.43	0
3	Mar. 24, 1994	129.2	82.30	81.35	0
4	Mar. 31, 1994	131.2	83.60	82.39	0

Next week's AWP, CCA and user marketing certificate payment rate will be announced on Thursday, April 7, at 5 p.m.

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Release No. 0272.94
Wayne Baggett (202) 720-2032
Bruce Merkle (202) 720-8206

SUGAR MARKETING ALLOTMENTS UNNECESSARY FOR 1994 FY 3RD QUARTER

WASHINGTON, April 1--The U.S. Department of Agriculture today announced that marketing allotments for domestic sugar will not be established during the third quarter of fiscal year 1994.

This announcement is in accordance with provisions of The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, as amended, which require the secretary to make quarterly re-estimates of sugar consumption, stocks, production, and imports. Based on these re-estimates, the secretary determines if allotments are to be instituted, adjusted, or suspended.

This determination is based on March estimates of the U.S. sugar situation and outlook for fiscal year 1994. Re-estimates of the fiscal year sugar supply and distribution will again be made in June to determine if marketing allotments are to be established later in the fiscal year.

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Features-

Release No. 0261.94
Herb Gantz (202) 690-0351
Ron Hall (202) 720-3310

USDA OFFERS ADVICE ON SAFE HANDLING OF SPRING MEATS

WASHINGTON, March 28 -- After a long hard winter, spring has finally "sprung." It seems spring cannot arrive fast enough.

This long anticipated season is a time of year rich in tradition and symbolism. "Colored Easter eggs, the smell of brisket or lamb roasting in the oven, the smoky flavor of ham--these are some of the traditional springtime favorites that we savor and enjoy," said Susan Conley, director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Meat and Poultry Hotline. "But we must remember that these special foods also require proper handling. Raw foods like meat, poultry and eggs can be a source of harmful bacteria. Thorough cooking destroys bacteria that could cause illness, while proper cooling and refrigeration retards the growth of bacteria."

With spring here at last, the Hotline has these safe food handling tips to offer so that the winter blues give way to a bright, food-safe spring.

PURCHASING: HAM AND LAMB. There are a variety of hams on the market today, so it is important to read the label to know how to handle and cook whatever type you buy.

Canned Ham: Some canned hams do not need to be refrigerated, but others require refrigeration. **READ THE LABEL CAREFULLY.** Canned hams with a "Keep Refrigerated" label must be stored in the refrigerator; use them within six to nine months. Shelf-stable canned hams may be stored, unopened, in the pantry for two years. Refrigerate after opening. Heat either type to 140° F or slice and eat.

Dry Cured Hams: Dry-cured (country) hams have special properties that allow them to be shelf stable for up to one year. However, refrigerate country ham after slicing. Sliced country hams may be kept in the refrigerator two to three months; once cooked, five to seven days. Heat to 160° F internal temperature.

Ready-to-Eat Hams: Fully cooked, vacuumed packaged, ready-to-eat hams must be kept refrigerated. Unopened, they can be kept for two weeks; once opened, use within three to four days. If desired, heat to 140° F before serving.

Fresh Hams: Fresh (raw) hams also must be refrigerated and used within three to five days. They must be cooked before eating to an internal temperature of 160° F. Leftover ham slices will keep up to three to four days in the refrigerator.

Lamb: Most lamb is labeled "spring lamb" or "genuine spring lamb." The term "spring" does not necessarily refer to the season the lamb was born, but to its age (less than a year) at the time it was sent to market. Lamb is covered with a papery whitish membrane called the fell, which should be removed before cooking as it tends to make the flavor of the meat strong.

Refrigerate all meats, eggs and poultry promptly after purchase.

COOKING: LAMB, BRISKET, HAM. All meat and poultry should be cooked in an oven set no lower than 325° F. Lower temperatures may not kill bacteria present in the food. Another important factor in keeping foods safe is thorough cooking. All perishable foods must reach a high enough internal temperature to kill bacteria. Brisket requires longer cooking for tenderness and desired flavor. Use a meat thermometer to ensure good quality and a safe internal temperature.

Internal cooking temperatures:

Canned refrigerated ham	140° F
Shelf-stable canned ham, fully cooked, vacuum packaged and unopened ham	140° F
Fresh ham	160° F
Fresh lamb, brisket, medium	160° F
Fresh lamb, brisket, well done	170° F

LEFTOVERS. All perishable foods should be refrigerated as soon as the meal is over, but no longer than two hours after removal from the refrigerator or oven. For foods like ham, lamb and brisket, carve the remaining meat and store in small shallow containers in the refrigerator. Use within 3-4 days or freeze.

SERVING THE PASSOVER SEDER. This holiday presents some food safety challenges as the entire meal--the brisket, hard-cooked eggs, gefilte fish, matzo ball soup--must be prepared ahead so that everyone can participate in the Seder ceremony.

Solutions? Cold foods can be arranged on platters ahead of time and served directly from the refrigerator. The brisket can be thoroughly cooked ahead in either the oven or a slow cooker. Slice it and refrigerate in a shallow pan and then thoroughly reheat to 165° F before serving.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline can be reached at 1-800-535-4555. In the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, the number is 202-720-3333.



Release No. 0262.94
Herb Gantz (202) 690-0351
Ron Hall (202) 720-3310

USDA MEAT AND POULTRY HOTLINE's SPRING "EGGS-Posé"

WASHINGTON, March 28 -- The blue eggs of the robin, little chicks developing inside their protective white shell, multi-colored Easter eggs--all signs from Mother Nature that spring has made it.

However, the eggs we eat or use in cooking must be handled with care and not only because of their fragile shell.

"Eggs, like raw meat and poultry, may contain bacteria. Salmonella enteritidis is of particular concern," said Susan Conley, director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Meat and Poultry Hotline. "Because of this, consumers should avoid eating raw or undercooked eggs or foods containing them. Raw and cooked eggs should be refrigerated at all times." How does this affect your holiday traditions?

EASTER EGG HUNT. Hard-cooked eggs for an egg hunt must be prepared with care to avoid cracking the shells. If the shells are cracked, bacteria from your hands and the hiding places could contaminate the interior of the egg. Wash your hands thoroughly before handling the eggs at every step, including cooking, cooling, dyeing and hiding. Since hard-cooked eggs should not be out of refrigeration for over two hours, hide them just before the Easter egg hunt, not the night before. The eggs should be hidden in places that are protected from dirt, pets and other sources of bacteria. Remember to re-refrigerate "found" eggs as soon as the hunt is over. For best flavor, use hard-cooked eggs within a week. Another safe alternative is to use plastic eggs--they can be easily hidden at any time.

BRAIDED EASTER BREAD. Recipes for this traditional bread often call for dyed, hard-cooked eggs to be pushed into the plaits of the bread before or after baking. These eggs should be considered decoration only and not for eating.

HOLLOWING EASTER EGGS. Conley cautioned against the practice of hollowing fresh eggs by blowing the white and yolk out of the shell before decoration. "There is a risk of ingesting bacteria like Salmonella that could be on the surface of the egg shell or in the raw egg itself," she said.

MERINGUES. Salmonella enteritidis may be in the whites of eggs as well as in the yolks. Therefore, care must be taken when preparing meringues using raw egg whites. Meringue shells that have been heated and air-dried are safe if all the moisture has evaporated. Meringues on a pie are safe if heated in a 350° F oven for at least 20 minutes, and the temperature in the center of the meringue has reached 160° F.

DECORATED CAKES. Many recipes for bunny-shaped cakes call for using raw egg whites in the frosting. But any time raw egg whites are eaten, there is the risk of food poisoning. It is probably wise to find a frosting recipe that uses hot syrup and egg white. If the egg white mixture reaches 160° F on a thermometer, it should be safe. Divinity candy and 7-minute frosting, made by combining hot sugar syrup with beaten egg whites, are also considered safe. Whipped cream or whipped toppings can be a safe substitute in some recipes. You may also be able to use a pasteurized meringue powder, generally available where cake decorating supplies are sold.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline can be reached at 1-800-535-4555. In the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, the number is 202-720-3333.



